

## **TRADITIONS OF FORMATION**

### **Technology as Theology**

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As the opposite of theology, technology is viewed as the goal, the rationale and truth of science, a system driven by its own means, which makes, transforms and controls life, without being part of it. Thus, theologians discover their significant role in opposition with science: to give meaning to a system or a process that has no meaning in itself, or at best one that can only be discovered and articulated by theology alone. As a consequence, it is suggested that technical universities need theologians as their guardians of truth, calling for responsibility and moral awareness. Theologians however, should reject that role, by returning that moral responsibility to its rightful owner.

Technological practices are open to reflections that range from the call for eco-awareness and moral and political responsibilities to the imagination of utopian hopes and the warning against apocalyptic self-destruction. Theologians are understandably keen to feed and further these reflections and usually do so by strictly separating faith from technology, emphasising their different, yet equal purposes. Ethics, for example, functions as a common ground to safeguard that equality. Sometimes, this leads to the opposition of theology and technology. The polarities are in that case considered to be connected by theology alone, by pointing at the dangers of technology or the opportunities to create the good life for all. Apart from pointing at technology's moral consequences, theology could also indicate technology's inspiration and creation, which can and should be considered not only to be similar to those of faith, but also as expressions of faith and reason in new and transformed ways.

To challenge the discussion, I would like to propose that there are ways to regard technology as the new theology. As the study and performance of worldviews, technology is similar to theology in as far as it explores and transforms the relationship to and being in the world. Theologians and scientists might differ about the content of worldviews, but the differences between theologians could well be and are not seldom much bigger than those between theologians and scientists. Most importantly, it needs to be acknowledged that both theology and

technology explore, articulate and affirm worldviews. As a consequence, theology could and should be an integral part of technical universities, and not only, or rather not as a critical counterpart of technology.

I would like to argue that technology is not a closed system of material transformation and control that needs theologians to find meaning as an exterior motive. In my opinion, theologians are mistaken if they think they could be the providers of that motive. Instead, I would like to propose that technology itself generates and transforms meaning, and therefore should be considered *historical* – emerging within history and generating history – and *charismatic*, i.e. a confirmation of its own indications and evidences.<sup>1</sup> Surely, it is open to illegitimate control and abuse, but that doesn't define it exhaustively. It is also part of the definition of technology that it is (1) a *deposit of the world and its resources*, and hopefully it will continue to prove an inexhaustible one, and (2) a *pattern of formation*, the present and dynamic reality of the affirmation of what is given once and for all. My main statement therefore would be the following: technology is tradition, and from a theological point of view this entails that it is concerned with learning and creating a sensibility for the presence of God in the world.

Instead of focusing on the anthropological constants of tradition – which unambiguously belong to the theological study of faith and religion – I would like to try out a theological – in the narrower sense of that word – approach of technology. To do this, I make use of the thought of Yves Congar, who has developed a theological theory of tradition in *La tradition et les traditions*, and I would like to present it here as a way of understanding of what technology as a tradition is and reveals.<sup>2</sup> He distinguishes three characteristics of tradition, that have become common knowledge among Catholic theologians in the twentieth century:<sup>3</sup>

- *Tradition is created and creating* – Tradition is concerned with questions about the way God relates to creation and the common life of God's creatures.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Apostolic letter *The Rapid Development* of the Holy Father John Paul II to those responsible for communications, 21-02-2005.

<sup>2</sup> Yves Congar, o.p., *La tradition et les traditions: Essai historique*, Paris: Fayard, 1960. English translation: *Tradition and Traditions: An Historical and a Theological Essay*, London: Burns & Oates, 1966.

<sup>3</sup> This short abstract of Congar's idea of tradition is based on the interpretation of John Webster, *Purity and Plenitude: Evangelical Reflections on Congar's Tradition and Traditions*, in: *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7 (2006) 399-413.

- *Tradition is pneumatologically motivated and inspired* – Tradition is a theological and pneumatological reality and not simply a historical-social phenomenon or mechanism in itself. What theology means by tradition, Congar writes, is something other than a mere human factor of moral importance or social cohesion. Tradition, according to him, is an ecclesial, christological, and especially a pneumatological concept. Its explication requires us to see that ‘unity of the subjects of tradition, which has for its inner principle the Holy Spirit.’

- *Tradition is the visibility of salvation* – Tradition is the church in its relation to history, emerging within history, but also transcending history. Tradition is an ecclesial visibility, a manifestation in the time of human history of the mystery of salvation.

In short: theologically speaking, tradition is a theological reality which presupposes the work of the Holy Spirit in the world, and this subject is the church, the people of God and the body of Christ. Applying this theological theory of tradition to technology, opens up questions about (the use of) creative knowledge and the dignity of making, and through it, transforming the world and human lives. To conclude, I would like to put forward some questions on technology in view of Congar’s characteristics:

- *Technology is created and creating* – How do the creations of technology relate to the world? Which world does technology construct or reconstruct as given? How does it conceive that given world: as possession, as loan, or as gift? And how does it show and perform a recognition of the needs or imperfections of the world? How does it generate its own role in the way it responds to these needs?

- *Technology is pneumatologically motivated and inspired* – How does technology manifest and perform a recognition of its motives and its wanted and unwanted effects? How is keeping a distance between the motives and the performance of technology possible? In other words: how can technology be acknowledged as a living subject of the spirit of creation, which it both transforms and belongs to?

- *Technology is the visibility of salvation* – In what way does technology generate transparent processes and goals – transparent both for itself and the society it belongs to? How can it be prevented that technology is driven by its inner technological goals alone, in such a way that these goals become available for self-criticism within the technological realm itself? How does technology mediate a given reality that is not its own, but one that can only be encountered

through the performance of a continuous reconsideration of its own responses to the needs of the world?

By asking these questions, theology's task can be rediscovered, not only as guarding the truth or as an analogy of technology, but as thinking God's presence in the world of technology, which in itself should be considered to reflect the world fully.<sup>4</sup> Technology then, does not have to be considered as a modern Prometheus, forming a godlike body of the waste of creation, but should be taken seriously as the formation of skills and solutions that are in themselves already responses to the needs of the world.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. George Pattison, *Thinking about God in an Age of Technology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, 97ff.